DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 847 FL 026 123

AUTHOR Servetter, Bob
TITLE Cooperative Learning and Learner-Centered Projects for Lower-Level University Students.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 10p.; In: Cooperative Learning. JALT Applied Materials; see FL 026 115.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; College Students; *Cooperative Learning; *English (Second Language); *Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Learning Motivation; Questionnaires; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Student Attitudes; *Student Centered Curriculum; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Japan

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a learner centered, cooperative learning group project in a post-secondary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classroom in Japan. The objectives of the cooperative learning project were fivefold: students would learn to work enthusiastically toward activating target language learning acquired in the past; do research on a foreign country where English is the main language and learn about the people of that country and their culture, food, sports, music, and points of interest; learn to give short speeches directed at a particular audience, learn to look at listeners, and speak in a loud and clear voice; practice listening skills by hearing other students' presentations; use their imagination to create a large poster. Overall, the results were generally positive. When asked if the cooperative learning approach gave them more motivation to study English or if it helped them become more successful with English, with the choices being very much, a little, or not at all, 70% answered a little, with only 14% and 7% replying not at all, respectively. When asked if working with a group encouraged them to help and support their peers, 61% answered very much and 35% said at least a little, leaving very few negative answers. The benefits of cooperative learning clearly make it worthwhile to use the technique with lower-level university students. (KPT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Gene van Troyer
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Chapter 8

ED 437 847

Cooperative Learning and Learner-Centered Projects for Lower-Level University Students

Bob Servetter

Fukuoka University

This paper describes cooperative learning (CL) theory and examines its use in a project carried out by Japanese post-secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Recently, there has been a paradigm shift away from the traditional teacher-centered classroom toward the learner-centered classroom (Campbell & Kryszewska, 1992; Chase, 1997; Deller, 1990). As we begin to incorporate this learner-centered ideology into our classes, we may naturally consider using groupwork and cooperative learning. What probably comes to mind when thinking about CL is a classroom full of students working together in several small groups. While this may meet the definition of groupwork, it may or may not meet the definition of CL.

What, then, is cooperative learning? In order to ensure a productive cooperative learning environment five essential elements are needed (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, pp. 4-7). These elements are: 1) positive interdependence; 2) individual

Servetter, B. (1999). Cooperative learning and learner-centered project for lower-level university students. In D. Kluge, S. McGuire, D. Johnson, & R. Johnson (Eds.), *JALT applied materials: Cooperative learning* (pp. 106-116). Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching.

FL C26123

accountability; 3) face-to-face promotive interaction; 4) social skills; and 5) group processing. Examples of these five elements in actual practice are detailed later in this paper.

Nunan (1992), in reviewing current research in CL, tells us, "Recent empirical work in literacy instruction has supported the theoretically motivated arguments in favor of cooperative learning" (p. 3). Further, Poel, Homan, and Flaman (1994, p. 1) remind us that:

> Cooperative learning (CL) is a method of instruction which many people consider to be new to the field of education. However, it is a tried and true method long used outside the ESL/EFL fields. It has been only in the last two decades that CL has made inroads into the foreign language classroom.

Foreign language instructors, especially in Japan, may find CL an even better approach for teaching their students than the traditional competitive approach as "the group tends to claim priority over the individual" and "concern for belongingness urges the individual to contribute to the group goal at the expense of his personal interest" (Lebra, 1976, pp. 34-35).

With the above in mind, it seems appropriate that we as professional teachers consider cooperative learning not only as useful but also as a sound pedagogical approach to teaching EFL in Japan. I have been using various CL models since I began teaching large college and university classes here almost four years ago. One of the ways I have incorporated CL into my classroom is through learner-centered group projects.

This paper will report on one four-week long CL project. I will outline its objectives and make various observations, and report results of a short student questionnaire.

Objectives for the Cooperative Learning Project

There were two broader goals and several objectives for this project. The first goal was to increase my students' enthusiasm for English and hence to enable them to activate their English language skills. The second goal was to discover whether the reasons for implementing cooperative learning in the classroom were in fact valid for the type of students that I was teaching (non-English majors considered to be of lower-level ability).

To increase my student's enthusiasm for English and help them to activate their English language skills, the objectives were as follows:

1. Students would enthusiastically work toward activating the target language that they had acquired in the past.
2. Students would do research on a foreign city or country where English is the

main language and learn about its various aspects such as its people, culture, food, sports, music, and points of interest.

3. Students would learn to give short speeches directed at a particular audience, learn to look at the listeners, and to speak in a clear and loud voice.
4. Students would practice their listening skills by hearing other students' presentations.
5. Students would use their imagination and artistic talent to create a large poster.

To discover whether the reasons for implementing cooperative learning in the classroom were in fact valid for the type of students that I was teaching, the objectives were as follows:

1. Students should work together in a productive manner by helping and supporting their peers.
2. All students regardless of their ability should increase their achievement.
3. Higher level students should help lower level students to increase their level of understanding of the target language.
4. The majority of the students should feel an increase in their motivation and desire to learn English.

The Project Details

The project was an adaptation of a similar project found in the book *Project-Based Learning* by Rudolph (1994, p. 36). Whereas in Rudolph's project the groups of students were asked to make a travel pamphlet on a place of their choice, this project asked students to create a large travel poster and to give a presentation of five minutes in length on a foreign English-speaking destination that the students wanted to travel to. For the presentation each student was to speak for at least one minute. After the presentations were completed, a small contest was held to determine which group's poster was best. This contest helped to incorporate the Teams-Games-Tournaments model of CL.

The student population in the study consisted of 322 first, second, and third-year private university students divided into seven classes and 80 groups of four. Those who participated in the case study were not aware that the study was taking place until the end of the project when they were asked to fill out a short questionnaire. The students were all non-English majors, considered to be of lower-level ability in English.

The students, after having been grouped by fours, were given a handout explaining the overall project (available from the author upon request). The

groups were formed two weeks prior to the start of the project allowing the students time to gather written information, maps, pictures, and art supplies. Students were strongly urged to do as much preparation as possible by reading about their travel destinations in advance of the start of the project. As students were researching together about one specific theme, each having to report on one particular aspect of this theme, the project thus combined, in some aspects, both the Group Investigation and Jigsaw models of CL. It was also at this time the students were told they would receive only one grade for their whole group and that each person in the group was responsible for an equal share of the preparation and presentation of their speech.

The actual amount of class time spent for the total project was four ninety-minute periods, with a one week break between them. During the first and second ninety-minute periods, the students had most of the time to work in their groups and were allowed to communicate in Japanese. The time spent during these two classes was allotted for the groups to create and make their posters and to write their individual speeches. There were also a few minutes allotted at the end of each day for the students to reflect on their work so they could determine what additional steps would be needed to complete the project satisfactorily. If the students wanted they could ask each other or the instructor for help in smoothing out their speeches. As the students were in the lower-level ability category, I also wrote several useful expressions on the board at the beginning of the first day to help the students with their writing.

Between the first, second, and third classes it was also important that the students do some homework. The amount of time spent was of course up to the individual and the more that the students accomplished during the class periods the less homework they had. The majority of the homework needed was for writing and practicing the speeches.

The third session was devoted to giving the presentations. On this day all of the groups put their posters up on the walls around the room. A student from each group then drew a number which represented the order in which they were to give their presentations. As the groups presented, one student at a time shared with the audience some information about the place that their group was reporting on. While each group was presenting, the audience listened carefully. One way that was used to usher this along was each individual in the audience graded each group's overall presentation. A simple form was handed out to the students to ensure uniformity (available from the author upon request).

The fourth period was used for holding an "International Travel Fair" during which all of the groups' posters were hung up on the walls. The students were allowed time to mill around the room to look at and enjoy the posters. Then the students voted by secret ballot as to which groups they thought created the first, second, and third best posters.

To create a true cooperative learning environment for this project I wanted to include the five key elements that Johnson and Johnson's (1994) research suggest are needed in order to ensure productive cooperative learning. Positive interdependence occurs when there is a sense that each member of the group is making a valuable contribution to the group's goal. I was able to accomplish this in part by having each student in the group work on his or her own individual portion of the 5-minute speech. Another area that aided group interdependence was the poster which all members of each group had an opportunity to create and design. Also needed for positive interdependence is the belief by all members of the group that they "sink or swim" together. This was accomplished by telling the students from the very start that each member of the group would receive the same grade based on the whole of their group's performance.

In addition to mutual interdependence a way to track individual accountability was also needed. The way I was able to accomplish this was that each student needed to research, write, and present his or her own portion of the group's speech demonstrating their own mastery of the topic. Without this individual accountability the group's final speech could have been done by one or two members of the group with the others being carried along the way. During the groups' presentations it became obvious to me that some members of some groups did very little to prepare their part of the overall speech. This lowered those groups' overall grades. The few groups that did do better than the majority seemed to do so because they had developed better group synergy and all members of these groups felt a need to contribute greatly in order to ensure a high grade.

Cooperative learning, when not structured properly, might allow for individuals of a group to work alone and then turn in the group's final work together. Allowing the students time to work face-to-face in the classroom created an opportunity for each student to increase their communication skills. Face-to-face promotive interaction helped to ensure interaction among the students as they helped each other to accomplish the task. As the students wanted to do well for themselves and for their group, this time together also helped the majority of the students to have a feeling of increased success which resulted in higher achievement and allowed the students to get to know each other on a personal basis. In addition, it may have helped a few of the silent or uninvolved students to interact with the other group members.

Social skills such as effective talking and listening, and small group skills such as decision making, trust building, and conflict management should be taught by the teacher in order to enable the students to be better communicators. For this there are two types of social skills taught. The first, task skills, allows the group to keep on task in order to complete the assignment. The second, maintenance skills, helps the members of the group to work well together (Dishon & O'Leary in McGuire, Kluge, & Thornton, 1996). As teachers

of university students, we may feel that our students have already learned social skills. However, I fell into the trap of thinking that my students would not need help with social skills and this created a lot of problems as many of my students did not have the skills to work together as expected. The biggest difference was that no one wanted to take on the role of leader for their group and this made it more difficult for the students to complete their project adequately and on time.

Finally, the fifth element, group processing, occurs when the students of each group begin to examine the task or project they are working on to determine if they are on the right course toward achieving their end goal. It also encompasses the group looking at themselves and the way they are interacting and working together. Part of this was accomplished by setting aside time for the students to discuss their projects to determine if in fact they were on the right course to help ensure that they complete their projects on time. Had social skills been taught, the students would have also been able to better discuss their group's interactions.

Evaluation of the Project

To evaluate whether the project was a success, I needed to determine if the goals and their objectives as mentioned above were accomplished. This was done by using three different tools: 1) an assessment of the project's end results using both objective and subjective means; 2) observation of the groups throughout the four-week long project; and 3) looking at and compiling the responses to a short questionnaire filled out by the students, relating to the main reasons for implementing cooperative learning in the classroom (available from the author upon request). As the questionnaire was used to determine important information relating to the study's second goal, I felt it best to present it to the students in Japanese as well as English.

Assessment of the Project's End Results

Both objective and subjective means were used to assess the end results of the students' projects. The groups' quantity of work—for example, the length of the individual and group presentations and the number of English sentences and labels, pictures, and maps used on the poster—were assessed objectively. The subjective assessment was determined primarily by asking questions about the end results of the projects. Besides quantity did the students do a quality job in producing their individual speeches? Were they well prepared to present them? Were the posters somewhat creative or done without much thought? I might emphasize here that the content was seen as the most important feature and there was less concern on the fluency level or the correct use of English.

The end results of the project itself were mixed. The quantity of time for most of the groups' speeches was sufficient. The groups spoke for about five minutes each; however, in some instances the time was not evenly distributed amongst the four students. In addition to this, many of the lower-level students did not spend a sufficient amount of time practicing their individual speeches and this resulted in lower grades for those groups. However, the posters were all very colorful, creative, and done with much thought, and the enthusiasm that the students showed while working together to create them was exciting to watch.

Observations: Successes and Problems

From the first day very little structure in the classroom was used as I wanted the students to truly experience a complete learner-centered environment. At first the motivation and the enthusiasm of the students were high. This may have been because the students chose to immediately begin work on the more enjoyable aspect of the project, making very creative and colorful posters. Several reminders were given to the students that they also needed to work on and complete their speeches and that they should keep an eye on the time. Despite the reminders, many of the groups took all of the first period's time and even part of the second for their posters. As a result of this most students did not have enough time in class to write quality speeches.

I had hoped that each individual would write their own one-minute portion of the group's five-minute speech and most did this. However, it was apparent that within some of the groups the higher-level students in some instances helped the lower-level students with their speeches. This may count as a negative with regard to individual accountability, but it was seen as a positive when relating it to one of the three main purposes for implementing cooperative learning, encouraging students to support and help their peers.

I made other observations that illuminated the project. Two weeks prior to the actual project, the groups had to choose a destination; I expected it to take just a few minutes, but it took quite a bit more time than I expected. Some groups were unable to decide even after twenty minutes. Another observation was that during the first two weeks of the project where the students had a lot of face-to-face interaction it was expected that the groups would do a lot of off-target chit-chatting, but with the exception of the first few minutes of each class the students worked diligently.

Concerning class attendance, I found that the students' attendance rate was higher, but only by a slight margin, with the exception of the day the speeches were given when attendance was very high. A final observation was that with the exception of a few students who had practiced sufficiently, most read their speeches from a written document.

Results of the Questionnaire

Laid out below in Table 1 are the responses to the short student questionnaire. Three questions were asked of the students to determine the validity of the objectives for implementing cooperative learning in the classroom for the type of students that I was teaching. The three questions were: 1) Did working with a group give you more motivation to study English?; 2) Do you think working in a group helps you to be more successful with English?; and 3) Did working with a group encourage you to help and support your peers? Students could choose from three answers: "yes, very much," "yes, a little," and "no, not at all." While this structure may seem to bias students toward giving yes answers it has the advantage of forcing students to make a firm choice between yes or no. Some readers may argue that some students may choose the middle answer without giving it much thought. However, I strongly encouraged the students to think carefully about their answers as it was important to my research and emphasized they would be protected by anonymity.

Table 1. *Questionnaire Results*

CL—Reasons for its implementation

	Yes, very much		Yes, a little		No, not at all	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Q. Did working in a group give you more motivation to study English?	47	16%	205	70%	42	14%
Q. Do you think working in a group helps you to be more successful with English?	67	23%	207	70%	20	7%
Q. Did working with a group encourage you to help and support your peers?	180	61%	104	35%	10	3%

Note: The numbers in this table represent the actual number of students (n) and their corresponding percentages (%), rounded.

In any case, the results of the student questionnaire clearly showed that when students learn cooperatively (even university-level students who are non-English majors and who have little enthusiasm for learning English) they can enjoy feelings of increased motivation, increased perceived achievement, and increased desire to support their peers.

Conclusion

This study has indicated that the benefits of cooperative learning are also available to university English teachers here in Japan. The results of the student questionnaire suggested that working cooperatively does indeed help to increase students' motivation as well as their level of perceived success. Knowing this it seems appropriate to include cooperative learning methodology in one's approach to teaching Japanese university students.

References

Campbell, C., & Kryszewska, H. (1992). *Learner-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chase, C. (1997, May). *New paradigms in education*. Paper presented at the Japan Association for Language Teaching meeting, Fukuoka, Japan.

Deller, S. (1990). *Lessons from the learner*. Essex: Longman Group UK Limited.

Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1994). Cooperative learning in second language classes. *The Language Teacher, 18*(10), 4-7.

Joyce, B., & Weil, M. (1986). *Models of teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lebra, T.S. (1976). *Japanese patterns of behavior*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

Nunan, D. (1992). *Collaborative language learning and teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poel, C.J., Homan, R.M., & Flaman, W.F. (1994). Cooperative learning. *The Language Teacher, 18*(10), 1-2.

Rudolph, S. (1994). *Project-based learning*. Tokyo: Newbury House.